

# Landscape Interpretation in the United Kingdom

## A Historical Perspective and Outlook

David Jacques

**L**andscape interpretation in Britain has been woefully inadequate post-war. This is especially disappointing because, after all, the English claim to have invented it in the early-18th century. The world's first guidebook to a garden was that for Stowe. In 1744 a local bookseller called Seeley published his *Description of the Gardens of Viscount Cobham at Stowe*, and in 1750 he found himself in competition with an engraver called George Bickham whose *Views of Stowe*, published in 1753, included 16 excellent engravings and a superb map. Seeley's guide was repeatedly reissued with improvements, and the number of other places for which guidebooks were published increased greatly into the next century.

The guidebooks to picturesque scenery effectively started with the publication in 1782 of William Gilpin's *Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of Wales, &c. Relatively Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty; Made in the Summer of the Year 1770*. This was followed by observations on the *Mountains, and Lakes of Cumberland, and Westmoreland, The Highlands of Scotland, Forest Scenery ... illustrated by the Scenes of New-Forest in Hampshire, and other polemics*. William Wordsworth wrote *A Guide Through the District of the Lakes* (1810) for his beloved home ground.

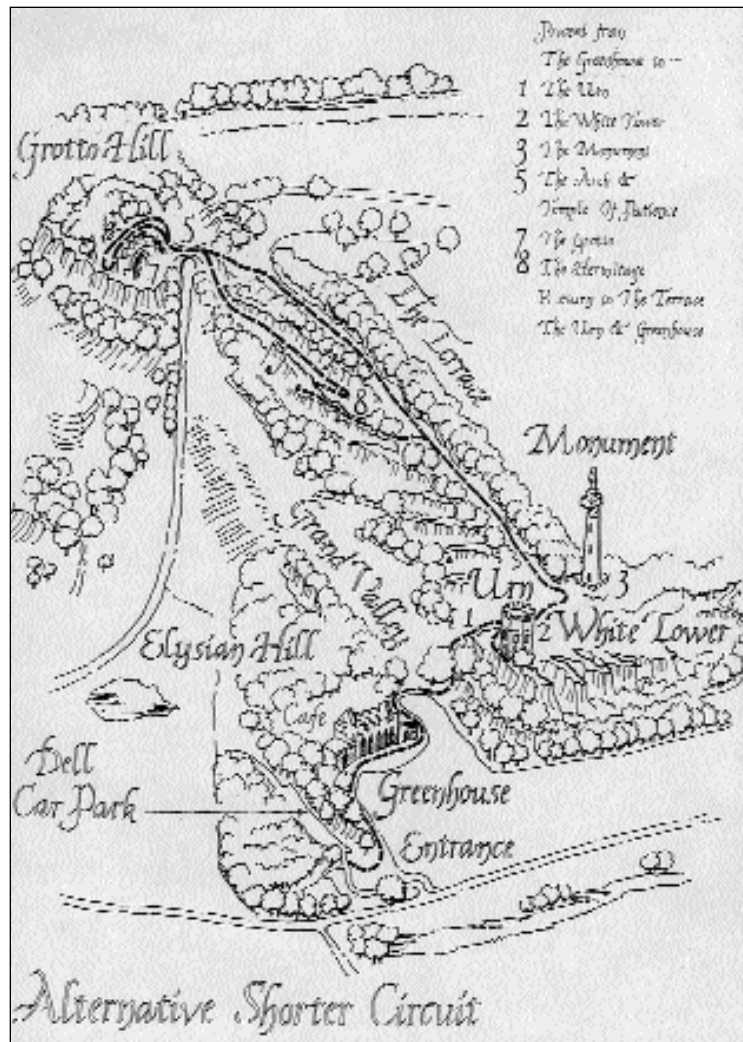
One characteristic of these works that strikes the modern mind strongly is their didactic quality.

The gardens of Stowe were intended to impart messages about the state of man in relation to nature and the state of politics. The guidebooks explained the emblematic qualities of the gardens. As for Gilpin, he was a school teacher, and his excursions were with the intent of codifying the principles of picturesque beauty so that he could improve his own and his pupil's appreciation of landscape painting. Though Gilpin disapproved of the use of landscape for making political statements, his books nevertheless shared with the Stowe guidebooks the assumption that readers wished to be intellectually stimulated through contact with the landscape.

The picturesque tradition in England continued well into the 20th century. Books giving instruction on the location of hilltop panoramas, the local history and legends, and the wildlife and farming of the area, were written for the increasing number of walkers, and those few who had vehicular access to remote areas. Then, from the 1960s, the style of such books changed. The Shell and Readers Digest books of the countryside became well-illustrated gazetteers, providing a superficial look at everything. The reasons may have been twofold. First, the greater degree of access by private car physically

allowed this gluttony of treasures. Second, there seemed to be an underlying assumption that the English countryside no longer needed interpretation; people somehow knew what was worth seeing. This was understandable, perhaps, in that an idealized image of the countryside was relentlessly fed to the public through television and advertising. Probably another part of the reason was the Modernist assumption that people instantaneously recognize "visual quality," so interpretation was unnecessary (which incidentally was the assumption underlying the landscape evaluation process exercises of the 1970s.)

Meanwhile, with country houses beginning to become open to the general public from the 1950s, there was a spate of guide books. There had been a tradition of guide books for ancient monuments by the Office of Works and its post-war successors, and these were very erudite, and incomprehensible to most



Visitor tour for Hawkstone, a landscape opened to the public without an accompanying house. The old problem of the guidebook providing almost no information on the landscape is certainly not the case here—the guidebook is almost solely about the landscape, and interprets for visitors background on the origin, development and evolution of the site from the 18th century to the present. Illustration courtesy of Walding Associates.

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of the visiting public. The new country houses needed to be populist, so tours of the house were written with an emphasis upon the contents and the family history. Where gardens were mentioned, the text provided a tour around the horticultural treasures, and seldom anything else. The wildlife park, children's zoo, or the model train ride were likely to occupy the lion's share of the back pages of the guide.

The working premise was that the public is intellectually passive, rather than interactive, in its appreciation of rural, scenic, or historic sites. The outdoors were viewed as mass entertainment, and each drew such numbers of visitors onto country lanes that incorporated into the Countryside Act of 1968 was a provision which enabled "Country Parks" to be funded, with the intention that people could be given access to countryside on the outskirts of cities. At historic sites, interpreters felt compelled to represent history so that it was more fun for children; it was more important to interest them in history than to worry about providing them with a fully accurate picture. The same tendency to fantasize was found in the re-enactments of battles by adults, many of which never took place. Taking the logic to its extreme has led entrepreneurs to devise theme parks, where historical images are re-packaged to have maximum impact. Britain did not escape this trend; Alton Towers in Staffordshire, and Thorpe Park in Surrey, were the home-grown, and second-rate, answers to Disneyland in the 1970s and 1980s. These phenomena are a far cry from the historian's desire for authenticity, and a suppression of imaginative falsehoods.

Interpreters have to ask themselves about the purpose of their work. The question is especially pertinent in Britain where the long-term political sub-text to preservation, as seen in the United States has been absent. American politicians who have been keen to promote the idea of the national, local, or ethnic community have chosen sites for preservation because of their qualities of illustrating the story they wish to be told; hence, the interest in battlefields, presidents' houses, and even the "trails" that opened up the West. The point of preservation is lost if the story is not then told by trained interpreters. Not surprisingly, the US National Park Service leads the world in interpretation.

In Britain, the commitment to preservation has come from the professionals themselves; politicians have acquiesced to preservation, rather than required it. The archeologists obtained legislation in their favor through a brilliantly conceived campaign of gentle pressure over many decades from the late 19th century onwards. However, few people in Britain now accept the old Office of Works idea that monuments are protected for their own sake, as objects of beauty, awe, and wonder, available to anyone who has the sensitivity to appreciate.

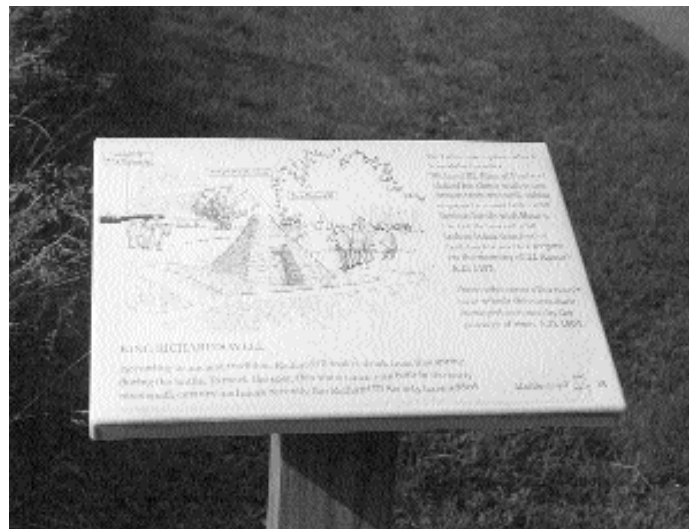
An opposing school of thought would liken the great monuments to the peaks of mountains appearing above a landscape covered in mist. They reveal only the most visible parts of the whole. The greatest determining events of history may not be the dates of monarchs and battles, but economic change like the emergence of



Models in exhibition of Bosworth Battlefield (1485) commemorating when King Richard III lost his life and the formal end of the War of the Roses. The battlefield has been altered beyond recognition over the 800 years since and the exhibition allows visitors to visualize the battlefield before actually visiting the site. Photo courtesy of Leicestershire County Council.



A special event at Bosworth Battlefield. Photo courtesy of Leicestershire County Council.



A typical battle trail interpretation board. Photo courtesy of Leicestershire County Council.

banking or technological innovations like the invention of the washing machine. According to this view, the interpreter should concentrate upon the forces that changed everyday life. One problem with this approach is the tendency for it to acquire historicist undertones that promote the idea of inevitable progress and suppress the role of unplanned events in shaping the world. Nevertheless, it has been given backing by many museum curators and politicians who are conscious of their accountability to the taxpayer in their use of public money and will readily accept that sites and monuments should be more relevant to the person-in-the-street.

The United Kingdom government, thinking that this populism should translate into financial returns, made it a duty of English Heritage to be concerned with preservation following the National Heritage Act of 1983, and established the Historic Royal Palaces Agency a few years later. Apart from emphasizing the potential of marketing the "heritage product," the politicians gave no further guidance on what was important. But if politicians do not give their lead in the purpose of interpretation, who does? What were the important events of history? For whose benefit is the physical testimony of historic events preserved? Not only do interpreters themselves have to be aware that their work can be made to serve particular and partisan agendas, but they must concern themselves with the means of interpreting themselves have to be aware that their work can be made to serve particular and partisan agendas, but they must concern themselves with the means of interpreting. Should they lean towards simplification for ease and clarity of interpretation, and improvements of the "attraction"?

The temptation to provide a literal interpretation of some former preferred period by reconstructing its physical form, or at least tidying up a bitty site, is strong. There have been garden reconstructions, inspired by period gardens such as Villandry in France and Het Loo in the Netherlands. In 1993 English Heritage reconstructed the 1690s garden at Kirby Hall, and the Agency is restoring the Privy Garden at Hampton Court, due to re-open in 1995, to its state in 1714. These are intended to provide historical experiences, but they are problematic. Because they purport to be literal representations of the past, the slightest error or incongruity presents the risk of deceiving the public. Also, reconstruction often nowadays involves excavation, hence a loss of the archeological record, in addition to tampering with the later fabric and adaptations to deal with asynchronic surroundings. Wholesale "reconstructions" of gardens now seem less likely than they once did. More cautious repairs, with just the occasional, and very carefully interpreted, period piece reconstruction, is the emerging picture.

The truth is often fuzzier and more complex than interpreters might wish. Interpreters should be well advised to distinguish the imagination necessary for a mind-expanding interaction with a landscape from an intellectually idle fantasy encouraged by entertainers. The exercise of imagination is often the only hope of interpreting the complexity of a multiple overlay landscape to visitors. It can be stimulated by such means as education packs for schools, posters, children's books,

guidebooks, artist's impressions, models and videos. The role of historians and interpreters could then be to identify the pertinent, and often difficult, questions raised through interaction with the landscape so that relatively unknowledgeable but interested parties can reconstruct events or scenes, and seek enlightenment through their own observation and reflection. Landscapes are evocative and useful templates for reconstructing the historical events and scenes of importance in the imagination, but often the best interpretation spans many sites, or uses many forms of interpretation to provide multi-media history on an economic or social theme.

By these means landscape interpretation would come full circle to a more didactic approach, though now with the benefit of far superior research and technology. The signs are there. Country house guidebooks are now often quite informative about the history of the garden and park; England's only interpreted battlefield, Bosworth, in Leicestershire, is widely thought to be very instructive; and the National Trust magazine tells its two million members much about pollard trees, field walls, and other landscape features in their control. Perhaps the most encouraging sign is the interest shown by schools. The new generation of visitors to gardens and landscapes appears set to have much more sophisticated expectations than their elders did in the 1960s.

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educators and interpreters in museums and historic sites learn about the past from period documents and artifacts. These should be our guides, not twentieth-century notions of what our site should have looked like or what we think 20th-century visitors would like to see.

It is not that historic sites have purposely avoided interpreting their landscapes; it is simply that they have been unaware of them. A long tradition has so emphasized the house and its contents that the wonderful messages in the grounds and landscapes have remained hidden. We can hope that attempts to raise the awareness of educators, curators, and visitors will lead to a holistic approach, the interpretation of the entire site.

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